

MARKETING and EXPORTING ON THE WEB

by Linda D. Aines

Much has been written about the Internet and its impact on small business. It seems impossible to remember a day in the past year when one hasn't overheard or found themselves discussing the Internet, the World Wide Web, Home Pages or E-mail. All of these forms of computer telecommunications are interrelated and provide a forum where individuals can find, share, solicit information or exchanges, and market their goods. In just a short period of time, the Internet has emerged from the exclusive domain of federal research laboratories and academic researchers to become the global communication network for modern business communication. The World Wide Web (the Internet's repository of commercial information and activity) is having a profound effect on the way daily business is being conducted. Through the World Wide Web, many barriers to new markets, resources and competitive positioning can be reduced or eliminated for traders globally. In a nutshell, the "Web" has added a new frontier to business marketing which can be both lucrative and inexpensive.

There are several ways of marketing a business or product on the Web. The first that comes to mind is creating a company Web Pages or a "Home Page"-- an electronic description of one's business and/or catalogs of the business' product offerings. Having a Home Page is akin to opening a retail store, except that the store is in Cyberspace. Web home pages are being added to the World Wide Web by the thousands every day and this rate is accelerating. Home Pages can generate substantial customer interest for companies. And businesses are reporting increasing export sale due to their presence on the Web. However, a Web Home Page is a passive method of marketing--like waiting in your store for someone to drop in!

A more active and effective method of marketing on the Web is to find the many websites with trade leads or buy/sell offers, and sites containing lists of importers, manufacturers, distributors or access to foreign traders. There are hundreds---or more likely thousands--- of these websites which are bulletin

boards for professional traders, importers, exporters, manufacturers, and affiliated services to global trading. Products requested or offered through these websites range from raw material or industrial goods to cosmetics, herbal teas, foods, or household items--anything goes! Such trading sites are easily accessible on the Web and provide ample opportunities to establish business contacts with buyers, manufacturers, exporters, importers, associations. For example, one can visit **The Import-Export Bulletin**, an electronic bulletin board which features daily "Offers to Sell" and "Offers to Buy" (located at URL address <http://www.iebb.com>). Or there is **TradePort**, another premier international trade website (<http://www.tradeport.org>) with information, news, trade leads, shows or events, jobs listings, etc. and **Global Agribusiness Information Network** (<http://www.fintrac.com/gain/>) with leads and posting board for the Ag sector. Usually there are no fees for using each site but, often, registration is requested before browsing. Another popular international trade site with many trade leads is the **United Nation's Electronic Trade Opportunities** home page (<http://www.untpdc.org/untpdc/eto/>) featuring trade leads from more than 140 UN Trade Point Development Centers and 900 affiliated trade bodies all over the globe. At such trade website, traders can post their own offers to buy or sell thus creating an ad of their product which can potentially reach millions of readers and at little or no cost. Often, the posting of a trade lead at a few sites can lead to further exposure in other web sites, print newsletters who pick up the trade leads to add to their own publication of offerings.

To give businesses better access to these international trade websites and bulletin boards, the home pages and websites have been bookmarked and made available in one Web location called "**The International Link**." The International Link website has an accumulation of clickable links to hundreds of websites containing Trade Leads, market research, and other miscellaneous export resources. To access the International Link, type the locator address <http://www.uvm.edu/~laines/export> in the locator box of the Netscape or Microsoft browser in your computer and like many other businesses in Vermont, click away to the many links which give immediate access to trade leads and contacts all over the world.

The recent advances in telecommunications have placed the very small business and the individual in a playing field where they can compete neck and neck with the large corporation in reaching a very large audience. The Web audience's size is hard to estimate as it is expanding so rapidly but the US e-commerce audience alone is believed to be hundreds of million persons. Other countries lag behind but are catching up fast. This is an opportunity for small business unlike any ever experienced before.

(Linda Aines is the Export and Business Specialist at the University of Vermont Extension. She is the developer and manager of "The International Link" Web Homepage which is an aid for exporters wanting to actively trade electronically.)